

Parked, but Not Forgotten

The Museum of Transportation showcases the brilliant to the bizarre

By Matt Hiebert



1955 Aerotrains complete with converted bus cars

Every exhibit at the Museum of Transportation in St. Louis has a story to tell. Some of the tales are about the evolution of technology. Others provide a glimpse into the way people once lived and traveled. Many reveal flashes of engineering brilliance, while a few demonstrate the cold reality of failure.

All of them are worth the trip.

Located off Interstate 270 on Barrett Station Road, the Museum of Transportation, which now spreads over 130 acres, began as a single exhibit in 1944.

“The museum got its start when the 1870 Bellefontaine mule-drawn street car was about to be scrapped as part of a World War II metal drive,” explains Molly Butterworth, the museum’s curator of collections. “A group of historically minded citizens got together to save it, and that gave them the idea to start a transportation museum.”

After that, the museum began to grow in both size and scope. The Missouri Pacific Railroad had abandoned an area that included one of the first train tunnels carved





The Big Boy steam engine was the largest ever built.



Visitors enjoy the variety of displays in the train shed.



The 1870 Bellefontaine street car was powered by a mule.

west of the Mississippi. It was the perfect site to get things started.

“The founders of the museum basically squatted on the property,” Butterworth says. “They formed a nonprofit organization called the Transport Museum Association and started acquiring artifacts.”

Fortunate timing allowed the museum to acquire some impressive machinery early in its history.

“The founders started the collection when the railroads were moving from steam to diesel,” Butterworth said. “Suddenly, there were several historically significant steam locomotives available for nothing.”

At the time, interstate commerce laws allowed for free transport of any object going to museums. That included items as large as freight trains. It was cheaper for railroads to donate old locomotives and passenger cars than to dispose of them. The result was a huge benefit for the museum.

“They were literally laying new track to accommodate the items that came in,” Butterworth explains.

The museum continued its growth through the late 1960s, until it had acquired almost every wheel arrangement (the standard method of designation) of steam locomotive built, plus an impressive selection of passenger cars.

A Small Failure, a Huge Success

Additions crossed a spectrum of historical significance. For instance, one item was an example of a good idea that turned out to be a failure.

At first glance, the 1955 Aerotrain looks like the predecessor to the modern bullet train. Its aerodynamic, brushed-aluminum body seems capable of incredible speeds. Then you notice the string of passenger cars behind it. They seem to be a little small and somehow familiar. In fact, they are converted bodies of city busses.

The idea was to use these widened, lightweight shells to create an inexpensive, ready-



example is the titanic “Big Boy.” This steam locomotive, the largest ever built, is on display with the cab fully accessible to the public. The array of valves channeling the steam flow looks every bit as complex as a modern jet cockpit.

For Butterworth, a confessed train enthusiast, the most compelling rail exhibit is the Norfolk & Western steam locomotive. It is historically and technologically significant because it was one of the last of its kind.

“The Norfolk & Western held on to steam longer than any other railroad,” she says. “There’s something poignant and sad about it. It was the peak of technology 60 years ago, and then it was just gone.”



to-roll passenger car. But it didn’t work. The bus bodies were too small and light. People riding in these cars were jostled around like prizes in a Cracker Jack box. Still, it’s a great addition to the museum.

Rail fans also can enjoy some of the museum’s many successful locomotives. One

The Brilliant

But the museum displays more than railroad items.

Inside, auto enthusiasts are treated to everything from a 1901 steam-powered truck

built by the Stanley Brothers to one of the first Ford Mustangs designed by none other than Lee Iaccoca early in his career.

Two of the most intriguing automotive displays sit at the end of the aisle. One is a marvel of mechanical engineering while the other looks like something George Jetson would drive.

The sleek exterior lines of the 1963 Chrysler Turbine Car seem simultaneously nostalgic and futuristic. It is a vision of the future that comes from the past. But if you really want to blow your mind, look under the hood. Is that even an engine?



The 1963 Chrysler Turbine Car's engine.

"That's the only operating turbine car on public display in the world," Butterworth says. "It runs on any liquid that burns: kerosene, whiskey, grain alcohol, even perfume."

With a body designed by Ghia of Italy and an experimental American engine, this car was one of these 130-horsepower oddities built by Chrysler. Designed to test alternative fuels, the car was passed around to 206 families who drove them for a while, then reported their opinions back to the company.



The 1963 Chrysler Turbine Car combined the past and the future.

When the project was terminated, 44 of the cars were destroyed to avoid import taxes incurred from the Italian components. Six others went to museums minus their engines and Chrysler kept the rest.

"First we received the body as a donation, then Chrysler sent us the engine a few years later," Butterworth says. "A volunteer found the intact engine in a crate and reassembled the car."

The Bizarre

Next to the Chrysler Turbine Car is another futuristic automobile that is rather cartoon-like. It was not built by an automotive engineer, but a fashion designer.

The Bobby Darin "Dream Car" is certainly one of most visually

fascinating vehicles on exhibit. According to Butterworth, it took four men seven years and \$93,000 to hand-build the vehicle, which seems more sculpture than car.

"It is an homage to the 1960s," Butterworth said.

Conceived and constructed by Andy DiDia, a Detroit fashion designer, the car features swooping rear fins, wraparound grille, Plexiglas top and 30 coats of translucent pearl paint with crushed diamonds mixed in to give it a sparkle.

The interior of the Dream Car is just as unique. Strange levers and switches adorn the dashboard at various locations. When asked about their function, Butterworth says they control the various electrical systems of the car. At least, when they're operating properly.

"We've had employees get trapped in there when they don't work," she says. Needless to say, the public is not allowed inside

Bobby Darin's "Dream Car"



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the car, which Darin drove in the 1962 movie, “Too Late Blues,” and donated to the museum in 1970.

Moving into the Future

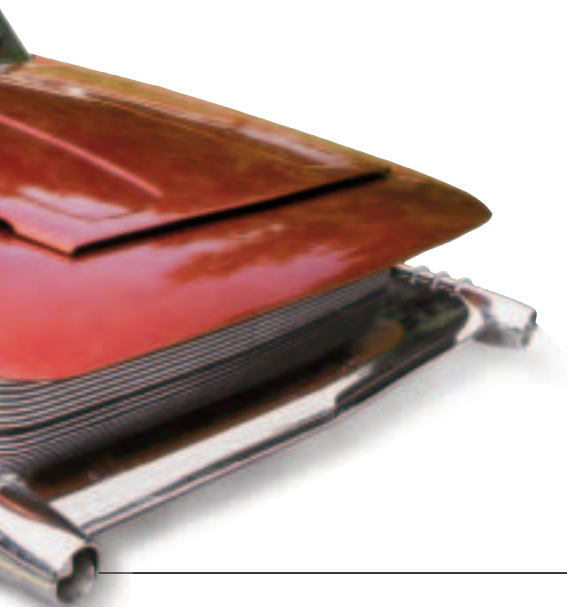
Now operated by the St. Louis County Department of Parks and Recreation, the Museum of Transportation is planning for the future. Capital and project funding for the museum comes largely from public and corporate donations. Working with the Transport Museum Association, the parks department is hoping to generate enough money to improve several features.

“Hopefully, improvements will include things like a restaurant, a new gift shop, a couple of galleries, and restrooms,” Butterworth says, stressing the last item. “Right now, it’s either the Porta Potty or a hike back to the visitors’ center.”

In the end, these displays are more than restored exhibits of cars and trains. They are captured moments of history. Their design and construction reflect the values and needs of generations long past. They are not merely machines, but lessons about where we’re from and how we got here.

May their journeys never end. ■

Matt Hiebert is senior writer for Pathways and an outreach specialist at MoDOT General Headquarters.



Bourbon citizens participated in the eighth annual citywide Trash Bash on May 11. Volunteers picked up enough litter to fill more than 100 bags of trash.

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Domke agrees, “This really is a grassroots campaign. The power of multiplying the message through a variety of local business and community efforts is huge. Neighbor-to-neighbor, friend-to-friend, teacher-to-student, salesperson-to-customer – the message will spread best when it’s shared personally and continually.”

Want to Help?

Armstrong encourages everyone to get involved on a local level by joining a Stream Team, the Adopt-A-Highway program or any other litter-free group. Citizens also can call local authorities and report littering or dumping.

“The best thing people can do is put their trash in garbage cans and remind others to do the same,” she says. “It doesn’t hurt anyone to stop and pick up a piece of trash and throw it away, and it sets a great example for others.”

Additional information about the No MORE Trash! campaign is available at www.nomoretrash.com. Contest videos should be sent to: No MORE Trash! 9229 Ward Parkway, Suite 225, Kansas City, MO 64114. ■

The Missouri Litter Profile

Who (Most Likely To Litter)

- Age 16-24, particularly when in groups
- Single
- Smokes
- Eats fast food at least twice a week

Why

- Doesn’t care
- Doesn’t consider it littering
- Thinks others will pick it up
- No trash can handy

What

• Fast food waste	33 %
• Paper	29 %
• Aluminum	28 %
• Glass	6 %
• Plastic	2 %
• Other	2 %

Source: MoDOT research

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